

STORY OF THE VACANT CHAIR

Recollections of the Author of Famous War Poem

PATHETIC INCIDENT EMBALMED IN VERSE

Melancholy Fate of a Heroic Soldier Boy Who Fell at Ball's Bluff—Popularized by the Press and Put to Music.

(Copyright, 1898, by Herbert L. Jilison.) We shall meet, but we shall miss him, There will be one vacant chair, We shall linger to careen him, When we breathe our evening prayer.

When a year ago we gathered, Joy was in his mild blue eye; But a golden cord is severed, And our hopes in ruin lie.

At our fireside, sad and lonely, Often will the bosom swell, At remembrance of the story— How our noble Willie fell.

How he strove to bear our banner, Through the thickest of the fight, And upheld our country's honor, With the strength of manhood's might.

True, they tell us, wreaths of glory Evermore will deck his brow; But this soldier's death is holy, Sweeping o'er our heartstrings now.

Sleep today, O early fallen! In thy green and narrow bed; Dishes from the pine and cypress, Mingle with the tears we shed.

We shall meet, but we shall miss him, There will be one vacant chair, We shall linger to careen him, When we breathe our evening prayer.

Throughout the length and breadth of not only this land, but others, the words of this familiar song and poem have carried comfort and balm to thousands of sorrowing hearts for more than thirty years. And upon no day of the year are they more fitting and impressive than upon Memorial day, when the nation honors its fallen heroes, and loved ones tenderly lay flowers upon the graves of those who have died in battle.



HON. HENRY S. WASHBURN, AUTHOR OF THE "VACANT CHAIR."

chorus, "We shall meet, but we shall miss him." Yet it is a strange story that is known of a piece of such international fame, and which has won so many admirers. Such is, nevertheless, a fact. Outside of what might almost be termed an immediate circle of friends of the author and the family of the brave hero, and which inspired his writing, little, really nothing, is known of the origin of the poem, its author, and hero.

This condition was brought about by the peculiar way in which the verses were first given to the public. The poem was written by Hon. Henry Stevenson Washburn, and was inspired by the death of a very promising young officer, Lieutenant John William Grout of the Fifteenth Massachusetts volunteers, Company D.

Subject of the Poem.

Lieutenant Grout, the subject of "The Vacant Chair," was the only son of Jonathan and Mary Grout, and was born in Worcester, Mass., July 25, 1842. His father was a successful business man, and the son enjoyed the best of educational advantages. In early life it was evident that he was endowed by nature with rare gifts, physically and mentally. A writer of his time remarks: "Of medium stature and symmetrical proportions, erect carriage and remarkably fine and manly features, and with elastic vigor and the glow of health, he might have been selected as a model for an artist." He was a diligent student, and mastered easily subjects to which his attention was given, but he turned with special interest to history, in its relation to nations, and their conflicts one with another. He seemed to have been born for a military life, and inherited, undoubtedly, a love for the camp from his ancestors. He was of the sixth generation from John of Subbury, who was a grandson of an English knight, and who distinguished himself for his heroism in leading his townsmen triumphantly against the assaults of the Indians in 1676, for which he was rewarded with a captaincy.

It was early a question what profession in life he should follow, a matter which was not settled till he entered the Highland Military academy, at Worcester, where, in the military department, he was active and enthusiastic and soon became commander of the cadets, winning their favor by his genial nature and his attention to duty. Hardly had his ambitions been thus gratified when the civil war became the matter of all-absorbing interest to the people.

No one was quicker than he to see that his hour had come, and he desired at once to enter the army, but his parents with held their consent for a while, chiefly on account of his youth, for he had barely attained the age when his country could legally claim his services. When, however, they yielded to his importunity, his joy knew no bounds, and with all the ardor of his nature he began preparations for the service before him, such as sleeping on the floor to nurse himself to the hardships of life in camp and eating plain food.

When the Massachusetts Fifteenth regiment was organized he received a commission as second lieutenant in Company D—an honor rarely bestowed upon so young a man. He was very popular in the regiment. His knowledge of military tactics was such that his services as a drill master were in constant demand. He assured his friends at the time of his departure for the front that he had given them his armor for all the emergencies of war and for victory or death. He seemed to feel the solemnities as well as the responsibilities of his position, but never faltered in his purpose, or in the duties which devolved upon him later.

Carnage at Ball's Bluff.

It was the fortune of the Fifteenth regiment to suffer great loss in that disastrous conflict at Ball's Bluff, October 21, 1861, the first in which the regiment had ever participated. The union troops had crossed the Potomac river from their camp at Poolsville, some miles back on the Maryland shore, and were engaged in a surprise attack and capture a confederate camp some distance back on the Virginia shore, and little or no preparation had been made for a hasty retreat. Hardly had the forces landed and scaled the steep bluff to a little clearing beyond before the confederate troops were aware of their presence, through a skirmish between the ad-

vance guard of the union troops and a company of confederate cavalry. This placed the union troops in a peculiar position. They had come over to make an aggressive fight, but, knowing that the confederates were aware of their intentions, they deemed it unwise to advance into a country of which they knew little. There was no preparation for a retreat. The action of General Stone in sending the troops over to such a way was the occasion of much discussion, and he was court-martialed for it after the battle.

The clumsy sows which brought the troops across were most of them on the left, and practically insisted on a hasty departure. Not knowing what else to do, Colonel Devens drew his men up in battle line in the little clearing at the top of the bluff and awaited the attack. The clearing in which the troops were stationed faced the river, and was surrounded on the other three sides by a thick growth of woods. When the confederates reached the scene they did not leave the woods, but fired on the union troops under their cover, doing deadly work. They filled the treets with sharpshooters, who added to the destruction.

The position of the union forces was well nigh hopeless, but they fought like heroes. Soon, however, the terrible fire became too severe to endure and the order to retreat was given, and down the steep bluff to the water's edge the soldiers tumbled pell mell. The confederates followed close upon them, thronging up to the edge of the bluff, from which position they shot the soldiers down like dogs as they rushed madly up and down the river bank, crossed in the boats or sprawled out in the water swimming for liberty. Escape was well nigh impossible, but many preferred death to captivity and took the slim chance offered.

It was during the flight and retreat that Grout's character, his bravery and training asserted itself in a manner never to be forgotten. During the battle, while men fell on every side, he escaped unharmed and his courage and self-possession urged him to renewed efforts. When there was nothing more to be done, he seemed to be utterly regardless of himself in his desire to have the wounded conveyed to the opposite shore. He crossed the stream with a load of sufferers, and seeing them safely landed, returned to render like assistance to others; but the deadly fire made it necessary to abandon the boats and he was soon obliged to plunge into the stream to save himself from captivity or death. He had reached the middle of the river when he exclaimed to a comrade near at hand: "Tell Company D I could have reached the shore—but I'm shot—I must sink." The waters immediately closed over him and his spirit was freed from the conflicts of earth.

When his death was announced, Colonel Devens, with deep emotion, said: "Dear little fellow, he came to me at the close of the battle and, and which would have kept him in camp and out of the fight, in which he lost his life, had he so desired."

For some time the Potomac held the body in its embrace, but it was finally surrendered to loving hands, and later was tenderly borne to his native city for burial. The chest of the commonwealth had never known a sadder day than when his remains, under the escort of the Highland cadets, attended by the mayor and both branches of the city government, Colonel Devens and a large concourse of sympathizing citizens, were taken to Rural cemetery for interment. There his body now rests, marked by a simple monument. Many tears were mingled with the volleys fired over the grave of the hero, who, at the early age of 18, fell a voluntary sacrifice upon the altar of his country.

Sorrow as an Inspiration. The death of so young and promising a soldier, at the very threshold of a brilliant career and the beginning of the war, made a strong impression upon the author of the poem, who had seen much of Grout, owing to his close companionship with Mr. Washburn's eldest son. One November day, not long before Thanksgiving, as Mr. Wash-



BUST OF LIEUTENANT JOHN WILLIAM GROUT.

burn was walking along and meditating upon the sad death of the brave lad, his heart went out to the bereaved family, whom he knew would miss with such pain the absent loved one on the approach- ing day of feasting. Suddenly the words of the poem flashed through his mind, and he wrote them down on the spot, just as they now stand, with hardly a verbal alteration. His idea was to send them to the family. Later they were given to a Worcester paper and printed with simply the initials, "H. S. W.," attached. Coming as they did in the hour of anxiety and sorrow, with their sweet and consoling beauty, they were speedily copied far and wide in the press of the country. Among others they met the eye of George B. Root, the composer and writer of war songs, who set them to music, without even knowing who the author was. This added to the poem's fame, which soon became international. So it stands today, as it ever will, for "vacant chairs" must always be sources of deep sorrow as long as the human race lasts.

Hon. Henry Stevenson Washburn was born in Providence, R. I., in 1813, but he passed his boyhood in Kingston, Mass. He comes from good old Puritan-Pilgrim stock. His early education was liberal. For fifteen years following 1843 he was engaged in the manufacture of wire at Worcester, Mass. In 1871 he represented a ward in Boston in the house of representatives, and in 1873 and 1874 was a member of the state senate. He was president of the Union Mutual Life Insurance company of Boston for some time, but in 1876 he resigned and went abroad in behalf of the company to investigate the workings of life, accident and kindred forms of insurance in Europe, spending several years in Great Britain, France and Germany. During his long and busy life Mr. Washburn has found pleasure in his hours of leisure in cultivating his literary tastes, and in the composition of verse. His subjects have been varied in their selection. They are pre-eminently poems of the heart. For many years Mr. Washburn's poems have appeared occasionally in leading religious and secular publications. A volume of them was published in 1896. Mr. Washburn is now living at the de-

lightful suburban home of his daughter in Boston. His pen is still busy, and busy. Worcester has done much to honor Grout. His bust has a place in the corridor of one of the high schools, his portrait hangs among a well known collection of war veterans, and a Sons of Veterans camp bears his name. HERBERT L. JILISON.

VIGILS OF WAR REPORTERS.

Exciting Times for Correspondents at Key West. When the war is over and the newspaper men have leisure to sit down and think and write something that will better bear inspection through a literary microscope than the hurried dispatches that they are compelled to dash off at present, not the least interesting of the articles they will then prepare will be those descriptive of the extraordinary difficulties under which they labored to get the news. There never was a war, relates the Philadelphia Times, in which the unfortunate war correspondent was so beset with perils, and so harassed by the most awful possibilities, "getting left on the news," as in this present remarkable war.

To take the men who are stationed at Key West as an example: Key West is, of course, the great center for war news. If Manila has had the first great story, it is in Key West, where the Cuban news center that the most important events of the war are destined to occur and where the newspapers have stationed their best men. With the cable cut there is only one way of getting news—by means of swift dispatch boats. Now the broad expanse of blue sea is a very wide stretch for a little boat to cover. No matter how active the newspaper men who are on the boat for the purpose of witnessing and writing up anything that may occur of importance afloat, it is not possible for the boat to be in more than one place at a time, and while she is cruising off one section of the coast of Cuba, it is not at all improbable that a great battle may be taking place at another point. While one dispatch boat is piling up steam in an earnest and well-meaning effort to keep up with a cruiser or gun boat that is chasing a Spanish fishing smack or lumber barge, the rival dispatch boat, better informed or more lucky, may be racing to Key West with news of a capture that will mean the double discounts that of the fishing smack or lumber barge.

And then the man at Key West. Out across the sea there is a blank expanse of blue water. Away off in the distance there suddenly appears a dispatch boat, pulling along apparently for dear life. The men ashore are snatching a few hours' sleep. They have been watching all day for the news that did not come and just as soon as they are wrapped in slumber there comes a hurry call to get up and go to meet the incoming craft. Then hurry! Then hurry! The boat is in sight, but he must swallow his grief and wait for the next arrival. Meanwhile the telegraph office is in the possession of the victorious newspaper man and there is no sleep for the rest of the fraternity.

Possibly the boat that comes in is a gunboat towing a prize or a captured boat in charge of a prize crew. In that event the newspaper men must swarm out and meet the vessel, catching at any straws in the way of news that may be floating on the surface. The reporter must ascertain the circumstances of the capture, the name of the prize and her value, get any interesting points about her officers and crew and get it in the best way he can, for United States naval officers, even when flushed with the happiness of walking the deck of a captured boat, are not going out of their way to provide news for the newspapers.

Having got the news, then the reporter's troubles are about over, thinks the inexperienced newspaper reader. Are they? They are just about beginning. It is the man who first gets hold of the wire who enables his newspaper to be ahead with a capture of a live incident of the war. The reporter who allows himself in his enthusiasm to stay too long getting the material for his story is likely to find the telegraph wire pre-empted by a whole row of rivals and his dispatches left until all the others have been sent away.

Have you ever tried to write on board a boat that is pitching and tossing in a choppy sea? If so, you will know why the men who are getting the news at Key West are acquiring the art of using a pencil under circumstances never before considered possible. It is fatal to leave the dispatch to be written when the boat lands. It must be ready for the race to the telegraph office by that time.

It is the same with the dispatches written "copy" must be written during the run for the shore. If it is not finished by the time the yacht reaches the harbor it must be continued during the journey of the small boat to the dock. Quickness is essential if the reporter wishes to be first with the wire.

At first the dispatches that were sent out from here were voluminous and wordy. The reporter spread himself to give the American public graphic descriptions of war incidents that would picture the scenes to the reader and enable his imaginations to have free play. Some of the reporters were kind of thing were happy. Suddenly there appeared on the scene a boy with a blue pencil whom they called the censor. Away went the imaginative reporter's beautifully written descriptions; dead and buried were his plans of campaign carefully thought out and pencil-written; ruthlessly blue-pencilled was his inside information about the intentions of the naval commanders. Only the news as the censor saw fit to see it was allowed to go through.

It saves a good deal of writing, though. What the censor will not allow to go through the terrible individual who sits in the editorial chair cannot complain about not getting. It is much easier to write a story according to the censor's idea of how it should be written than according to the ideas of an editor and the newspaper boys are gradually getting down to the new style of things and saving the blue pencil much work and the journal that employs them much expense for telegraph tolls.

But even under the best circumstances it is a tiresome task to report a modern war. What it will be when the need is of killing, slaughtering, annihilating fights occur around Cuba the hardest of Key West correspondents hardly dare to speculate upon.

Mosby and Fitzhugh Lee. The conversation had naturally drifted into war channels, relates the New York Sun, and the major had the floor. "Well, Colonel Mosby," you know, was a good fighter, but when General Grant sent him to China the Virginians turned the cold shoulder to him. One day he was making speeches in Alexandria. He told the Virginians that they ought to vote for him.

"Why," said the colonel, "I fought all a part of the Virginia fight last year about my war record? Why, my war record is one of the state's history. Why, gentlemen, I carried the last confederate flag through this very city by night. I was here at the time." "Yes," replied Fitzhugh Lee, "for I was here at the time." "Thank you for your fortunate recollection," gratefully exclaimed Mosby. "It is pleasant to know that there still live some men who were beside me and testify to the courage of their fellow beings. As I say, gentlemen, my war record is a part of the state's history, and the gentlemen here will tell you that I carried the last confederate flag through this town."

The Conventional in Jokes. Detroit Journal: The woman lingered at the stamp window only until she had asked 287 questions. In the meanwhile a crowd of but 1,976 impatient people collected behind her. "Alas!" sighed the humorist, tearing up his notes. For the management of the paper for which he was held down that anything short of 400 questions and 2,000 people wasn't a joke.

An Ambition. Washington Star: "Do you think you will succeed in outwitting the Yankee pigs?" inquired the Spanish officer. "I don't say that we'll outwit them," was the answer. "But the landmen shall not have all the glory. We'll give them almost as much difficulty in finding where we are located as they have in discovering where we stood diplomatically."

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